

Project Starfish/Capstone

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Founding Fathers: Washington, Madison, Hamilton, and Franklin

America's founding fathers include George Washington, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and Benjamin Franklin. Though each of these men came from different backgrounds, they each shared common ideas of freedom, liberty, and justice for the people. These four men made significant contributions in creating the U.S. Constitution. No matter what their position in the formation of a new nation, each of these men was involved in liberating the United States from British rule.

George Washington was born on February 22, 1732, in Westmoreland County, Virginia. He was home schooled from the ages of 7 to 17 at his local church. He later earned his master's in practical math, geography, Latin, and English classics. At age 11, his father died and he lived with his half brother Lawrence who inherited the family's plantation. When George was 16, he was plotting land in Virginia's western territory and began to have an interest in land holding. For the next two years, he spent most of his time surveying land and was given the job as official surveyor of Culpepper County (Freidel 2006).

When Lawrence died of tuberculosis, George inherited Mount Vernon and became a plantation foreman. Washington was one of the most honorable farmers and showed signs of strong leadership. In the early 1750's, when the French army occupied most of the Ohio Valley, George received the rank of Major in the Virginia Militia. On October 31, 1753, George was sent to warn the French to leave all land claimed by Britain. As the French refused, Washington came back with troops and set up a post at Great Meadows. He troops attacked a French post where they killed a commander, nine other troops, and took the rest as prisoners. This event caused the

French and Indian War. After returning with success, George was featured in the *London Gazette* as Colonel of the British. Washington became Chief in the Army in the American Revolutionary War. He was then elected as a representative of Virginia in the Constitutional Convention, but then promoted to President of the Convention. It was here that he played a role in the creation of the Constitution and became the first president of the United States (Freidel 2006).

As Washington did many things to help our country, so did Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton was born in the West Indies, but moved to the mainland in 1772, and entered King's College, now Columbia University. After speaking at public meetings and writing revolutionary essays, by 1776, he was a Captain of Artillery. He joined Washington's staff in 1777 where he remained until February 1781. In 1780, he married Elizabeth Schuyler, daughter of the Major General and Hudson Valley landlord, Phillip Schuyler. This marriage cemented his social position and his political, elitist point of view. He argued throughout the 1780's for strengthening the National government (Welling 2012).

Alexander Hamilton went on to become a member of the Continental Congress, an author of the Federalist Papers, a champion of the Constitution, and the first secretary of the Treasury. As secretary of the Treasury, Hamilton's great achievement was funding the Federal Debt at face value, which rectified and nationalized the financial chaos inherited from the revolution. He helped create the First National Bank, the U.S. Mint, and a tax collection bureau that would later become the U.S. Coast Guard. He generated the Washington Administration's policy of unfriendly neutrality toward the French Revolution and established cooperation with Britain. Troubled by personal and political scandals in his later years, Hamilton was shot and killed by the then Vice President, Aaron Burr, in July 1804 (Welling 2012). As Hamilton influenced the political system of his adopted country, so did James Madison.

James Madison was born March 16th, 1751, at his grandmother's home in Port Conway Virginia. Madison was the oldest of 12 children and was raised on the family plantation, Montpelier, in Orange County, Virginia. After being home schooled by his mother, tutors, and attending private school, Madison attended Princeton which was at the time called the College of New Jersey. It was here that he became interested in government and law. He soon embraced the patriot cause and both state and local politics absorbed much of his time (Freidel 2006).

In 1780, Madison was chosen to represent Virginia in the Continental Congress. Although he was the youngest delegate, he played a major role in the deliberations of that body. He wrote extensively about the deficiencies in the Articles of Confederation. In 1794, Madison married Dolley Payne Todd who had a son from a previous marriage. The two were never able to bare children of their own. While he served as Secretary of the State from 1801 to 1809, his wife often served as President Jefferson's hostess (*The Presidents of the United States of America*).

James Madison was America's fourth president from 1809 to 1817, and is considered the Father of the Constitution. James Madison wrote the first drafts of the Constitution and established the Democratic and Republican parties. He, alongside Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, wrote the federalist essays. He helped frame the Bill of Rights and enacted the first revenue legislation. He is credited with initiating the War of 1812, and died on June 28, 1836, at the Montpelier estate in Orange County, Virginia. As James Madison is known as the father of the Constitution, Benjamin Franklin is known as a statesman, author, publisher, scientist, and diplomat (*The Presidents of the United States of America*).

Benjamin Franklin was born on January 17, 1706, in Boston, Massachusetts. He started school at the age of eight years old and quickly engaged in scientific discoveries and

investigations into electricity, mathematics, and cartography. From a young age, he was destined for success. He was known as a printer and a writer full of wit and wisdom. In 1729, Benjamin Franklin bought a newspaper, *The Pennsylvania Gazette*. This newspaper was extremely successful in the colonies. By 1733, he started publishing *Poor Richard's Almanac* and coined phrases such as "A penny saved is a penny earned." (*The Electric Benjamin Franklin*).

Throughout the 1730's and 1740's Franklin had many civic contributions. He helped to clear and light Pennsylvania streets, he began the first library, launched the American Philosophical Society, and helped to create the Pennsylvania Hospital. By 1750, he began his studies in electricity. Franklin gained international fame with his kite experiment which verified the nature of electricity and lightning. Among other things, he is credited with inventing bifocal glasses and is known as being the first General Post Master of the United States (*The Electric Benjamin Franklin*).

Franklin considered himself a loyal Englishman and went to England in 1757 to represent Pennsylvania in its fight with the descendants of the Penn family over who should represent the colony. He then remained in England as a Colonial representative for not only Pennsylvania, but Georgia, New Jersey, and Massachusetts. Franklin wanted to unite the colonies and worked toward that goal until the Constitution was signed. We would actively work toward independence and more importantly, he helped to draft the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and he negotiated the Treaty of Paris, ending the Revolutionary War. He died on April 17, 1790 and is buried in a cemetery in Philadelphia (*Benjamin Franklin*).

Because these men shared the ideas of freedom, liberty, and justice for the people, they united the colonies and formed a new nation. The Constitution was written and then signed on

September 17, 1787, allowing their legacy to live on and set the precedent for politics in America today. Their efforts have allowed this nation to change throughout the times for the better of the people. Without our founding fathers, James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton and George Washington, the great nation of America as we know it wouldn't exist.

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